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August 2024

1949 "Estes Park Trail" Article on Elk Over-Populating Rocky Mountain National Park

Estes Park Trail

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Recommended Citation

Estes Park Trail, "1949 "Estes Park Trail" Article on Elk Over-Populating Rocky Mountain National Park" (2024). *Rocky Mountain National Park*. 15.
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STATE KEEPING CLOSE CHECK ON ELK KILL TO DETERMINE NEED FOR POST-SEASON HUNT

State game wardens are keeping a closer-than-ever check on elk taken in the Estes Park vicinity this week to determine the necessity for a post-season on the big animals that are too-thickly populating Rocky Mountain National Park.

It is expected that the State Game and Fish Department will make an official announcement this week on the post season, as well as on other control measures. The state and National Park officials are working hand-in-hand on the problem.

Good kills were made on the first two days of the current season, but many hunters reported that the wandering elk headed right back into the National Park when the bullets began to fly. It is hoped that cold weather will bring them out for the post season.

1,272 Elk in Park

The 400-odd square miles of mountainous terrain near Estes Park now harbor a summertime elk population of an estimated 1,272 animals. That tremendous herd has materialized from the 50 elk that were brought into the area in 1913 and 1915 by a group of wildlife-conscious people in the Estes Park-Lyons area.

Back in the days when every attractive homesite outside the National Park was not occupied by a nature-hungry vacationist, the elk and deer were able to utilize the mountain meadows in summer and then, through habit, migrated to the vast plains grasslands in winter. Even today, the high mountain range is sufficient to maintain them in the summer—but it is in the fall, winter and early spring that they prove themselves too numerous for the range that is available to them, according to studies made under the direction of Supt. David H. Canfield and Chief Ranger J. Barton Herschler.

Are a Protected Resident

The introduced elk, now greatly multiplied, and great numbers of deer are not only protected from hunters, but also from their natural enemies to some extent (lions, coyotes, grizzly bear and wolves.)

According to Act of Congress, the National Park offers complete protection to all animal life within its boundaries, but the same Act of Congress also specifically stated that the area was to be maintained in its natural, primitive condition. Consequently, the forest cover and all vegetation was given the same protection as wildlife. And when wildlife increases to such an extent that it alters the flora of the area, the National Park Service is obligated to control the wildlife sufficiently to preserve the native vegetation.

Tour to Study Conditions

Last week a group of men interested in wildlife and the preservation of primitive conditions was conducted through the National Park to see for themselves how the entire range aspect of the Park has been changed by over-grazing and over-population.

They studied plots that were fenced off from deer and elk in 1934, and compared them with adjacent land.

They learned that aspen groves are rapidly disappearing and that new growth is eaten off every winter

They found that willows are dying in meadow areas, and in some cases have been eaten back as much as seven or eight years.

Purshia or bitter brush, a favorite deer browse, is eaten back to a point where it is only about one-fifth of its natural growth. Good grasses have disappeared and in their place are large hillsides of cheat grass and thistles that are known as the "starvation diet" of deer and elk. Even the Ponderosa Pine is being eaten as high as the game animals can reach.

National Park officials point out that not only is the range being abused, but the animals grazing on it show signs of deterioration.

During the winter of 1948-49, over 85% of the deer fawn crop died of starvation, as did many adult animals. Officials fear that both deer and elk are now at a point where starvation and disease will take over.

Problem a Serious One

Since civilization has absorbed most of the normal winter grazing areas surrounding the National Park, the animals refuse to leave the Park, and many property owners outside will not allow hunting on their property, the game problem is a knotty one for the National Park.

In cooperation with the Colorado Game & Fish Department, several attempts have been made to control the over-population.

Hunting is now permitted in formerly-closed areas adjacent to the Park. A special post-season on elk was carried out in December, 1941, but was but half-successful since elk refused to leave their protected area.

In the winter of 1944-45, the National Park reduced the number of sedentary (non migrating) deer and elk; some 301 elk and 113 deer were removed. It was hoped that this action might partially solve the problem, but the herds have increased and the range continues to deteriorate.

Are Considering Solutions

National Park officials are currently considering several solutions to their game problem and will probably announce their decision in the near future.

Supt. Canfield said this week that the Park Service would welcome individuals or groups to visit the Park and study existing range conditions in comparison with the enclosures wherein grazing has been prohibited since 1934 and 1935.

4-H Achievement Week Will Be Nov. 6 to 12

Fort Collins, Oct. 19—National 4-H Achievement Week for nearly two million boys and girls who are enrolled in clubs throughout the nation will be observed November 6 to 12, according to Cecil G. Staver, state 4-H club leader for the Colorado A & M College Extension Service.

Here in Colorado more than 17,000 rural youths are enrolled in 4-H club work in 1,725 clubs. Heading up the groups are 2,090 local volunteer leaders and 615 junior leaders.

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H. M. Ratcliff
10/26/49